

CONQUERED

By Eleanor M. Ingram

A STRONG blast of wind rushed around an angle of the huge, somber building, driving crystal-hard snow particles against the American's face with stinging force while overwhelming his voice with hissing clamor. When speech again was possible, he moved closer to the rough stone wall, looking up through the darkness.

"For three years," he resumed the broken conversation, "I have told myself each day: 'who knows? I may see her to-morrow.' And now there will be no more to-morrows. Being half Russian, I know Russian methods, and the governor is having the city sifted for me. Florya, I have so hungered to touch you—and this is the last time—is there no way I can come up for one little moment?"

"No," the girl's soft, broken tones fell from above. "Our voices would be heard; you would be found. I will come down; I have a way."

"Dear, you dare?"

"Yes, for you."

He drew a sharp breath and laid his hand on the building's harsh surface as if to caress the one it sheltered. Heavy, snow-filled obscurity clung everywhere, most dense over the ice-covered, blank river-stretches across which Lucian Steele intended to make his last desperate attempt to keep his freedom. This side of the governor's palace was unlighted and very still.

"How—" he began.

A silken mesh unrolled down the side of the wall, a ladder of slender cords incredibly strong.

"Do not look," Florya begged unsteadily. "Not while I come."

Steele went on his knee in the frozen snow before the girl-timidly blent with so much courage, and with bent head held the ladder firm. There was the rustle of rich fabrics, a movement in the dark, and he sprang up to meet the

slight, swaying figure. To each other's arms they turned with utter naturalness of the naked moment.

"My dear, my dear—this time I was so sure of success," he fiercely regretted, his lips upon her fragrant coils of hair. "I was so certain of establishing Constantine's republic here in this province, for all Russia to copy, and then taking you to America. Failed, all failed!"

She rested her head against his shoulder, saying nothing. In the icy, brutal winter night, these two were girdled by an atmosphere of vital youth and rebellious passion; even their despair was a fire that burned, not a cold numbness.

"At dawn, the governor's men will find me, as they have already found Constantine, and—well, I had better try the river crossing, or any other way. I have been facing just this for years; it is only you I think of, Florya."

She clung closer, not in tears, but trembling from head to foot.

"I should have thought of you first," he reproached himself. "I should have let all things wait while I carried you out of this country. You are so helpless, here."

"The governor is good to me," she corrected wearily. "His distant cousin and his ward, I live in his wife's household, at peace except for want of you. If he is harsh and cruel, I do not see him so."

He clenched his teeth, holding her still closer.

"Then he is kinder to you than I have been. I have let you wait for me, when you should have been my first care. You are freezing—you must go in; at least let my selfishness end now, and send you back to safety."

"No, no! Not yet. I have said nothing. Lucian— Oh, the long years to come!"

They clasped each other avidly. She wore a long fur coat, but beneath it satin and lace offered frail shield from the biting cold, while through the silk scarf

snow sifted over her soft hair. Even as Steele's lips touched hers, he drew her nearer to the wall, reaching for the ladder. Once he passed his hand across the dark stones, twice; then abruptly put the girl from him and groped across the dark surface. Infected by his agitation, she followed.

"The ladder, Lucian, the ladder?"

He rose, in his hand a mass of ice-sheathed cords.

"The ladder has slipped," he explained with difficulty, a coward before her peril. "The ladder is here."

The calamity was too great for outcry! Florya stood mute. The treacherous silk knots had glided from their hold, and there was no way to raise the yielding rope ladder. If the dawn menaced Steele with death or captivity, it now promised certain ruin and disgrace to the young girl.

"My fault again," he assumed bitter responsibility. "My asking brought you here."

"No," she comforted. "I wanted to come down. I did wrong, not you; I broke my cousin's trust in me, to see you again. It is my fault. Look—"

Around a distant angle of the huge building was cast a glare of light through the storm, faint voices and tinkling bells sounded.

"The governor is returning," she hurriedly interpreted. "Lucian, I will not be called, what people would call me. Why should I care to live so? Go, dear, across the river as you had planned, and take the ladder with you so that no one may guess the truth. They will think that I leaned too far from the window above, and fell here to die."

"Never!" he cried savagely. "Come with me; I will find you shelter."

She shook her head sadly.

"You have none for yourself, poor Lucian. I should be arrested with you and disgraced forever. I will not bear that. It will not take much courage, this way, not half so much as to go on living without you; I have only to wait here until the cold numbs me to sleep. It will not even pain, after the first."

"Never! I will find a way—there is a door ten steps from us."

"A door that ten men could not force; and there would be noise. Kiss me, and go while you can. The cold settles through me already."

Incredulous, he sprang to fling his unavailing strength against the door set deep in the wall. But even as Florya followed to protest, he ceased the attempt and turned to her, his plan determined.

"Give me your word to wait for me a quarter hour," he demanded.

She smiled across her growing suffering.

"Where else should I go, Lucian? But we had best end now, while we have courage."

Lips set, he stripped off his overcoat and wrapped it about her, the coarse cloth mating oddly with her rich furs.

"Wait here; do not wander away. I will come soon, Florya."

She would have spoken, but he crushed entreaty on her soft mouth with a kiss and plunged into the storm, running.

The governor of the city and province by imperial appointment, Prince George Phranza by birth and autocrat by gift of nature, was standing on the palace steps. He had lingered, laughing and chatting with the officers who had escorted him from the French opera, but he was turning to go in when Steele emerged from the shadows.

"Will your excellency hear an offer?" the American asked clearly.

There was a startled movement of the group. The governor put out a gloved hand to restrain his attendants, his long-lashed black eyes sweeping the indistinct figure opposite.

"Go on," he permitted, his voice a velvet-sheathed command. "What offer?"

"Will you order your people to stand farther away, sir?"

The request was sufficiently ominous, in a country where assassination was one of the daily risks of all high officials. But the governor, although lifting his eyebrows, waved his suite back and moved nearer to the visitor.

"Thank you," Steele acknowledged. "Your excellency, all over the city your men are searching for the American, Lucian Steele. I will deliver him to you

or your officers, in exchange for a ladder from the palace and your word that I shall not be followed while I make fifteen minutes' use of it."

Phranza again passed a deliberate glance over the other man, and paused in brief consideration. He was still young, this governor; the representative of an ancient family which, though Russian for more than three centuries, was originally Greek, and he revived the old type in a delicate, Hellenic beauty of feature. Steele had seen him before, but never so clearly as now, and in spite of suspense he was aroused to unwilling, impersonal admiration.

"Will you bring Lucian Steele here, at the end of the fifteen minutes?" came the query.

"Yes; if you will take my word for it," the American gave quick assurance.

"I should be able to take your word to return, if you can take mine not to have you followed," the governor drily replied. "Very well, it is a bargain, Mr. Steele."

The other drew back, astounded out of caution.

"You know me!"

"Why, yes, I know you. What of it?" Phranza put his fingers into his vest. "Will this masterkey to the palace doors serve you as well as the ladder, perhaps?"

Before the dark, brilliant face and malignly intelligent smile, Steele's weary senses reeled.

"You know?" he again stammered.

"Nothing. But I imagine. Of course, if you prefer a ladder—"

"No," Steele said, grimly acceptant of what could not be escaped. "No," and took the proffered key. His thought was of the little door near which Florya waited in the deadly cold. Whatever the end of this, it meant life and warmth for her now.

As he went down the steps, he looked back. The governor had turned to enter the building, tranquilly unclasping his furs.

The fifteen minutes had not quite elapsed when Steele returned to the palace entrance, where he had left the

governor. An officer lounged forward to meet him, stifling a yawn.

"For his excellency, monsieur?"

"Yes."

"Please to follow."

Unguarded and unheeded, the man for whom the city was hunted followed through the home of the city's master. At a curtained door, the guide stopped.

"Please to enter," he requested, and withdrew.

The room was furnished with an opulent gorgeousness, glowing with a profusion of lights. And in the midst of the dazzle of color and tinted reflections, the governor, in his glitteringly picturesque uniform was seated, reading. Steele felt a sudden irritated consciousness of his own rough clothing and out-of-place peasant disguise.

"You are punctual, Mr. Steele," Phranza greeted, looking up. "But you seem rather fatigued; will you not be seated while we arrange our matters?"

Steele came forward; he was indeed verging upon exhaustion, but the knowledge of Florya's present safety lay warm at his heart, her last kiss was a cordial on his lips.

"I have to return this, with my thanks," he stated, and laid the masterkey on a little onyx table beside its owner.

The governor shut his book and surveyed his guest, his red lip arching.

"This is an unhappy affair," he regretted. "Really, I should have preferred to receive you otherwise than as a prisoner. A Russian mother and an American father, an education half here and half there—no wonder you have the superb, if somewhat reckless ambition to overturn the whole empire. And yet, for what good? I suppose you have ruined yourself in endeavoring to set Michael Constantine in my place, because you are sure that he is more wise, more just and trained to rule better than I?"

Steele moved, slightly flushing. He had never put that bald question to himself.

"It is not Constantine I would establish, but a republic," he corrected stiffly.

"He seemed to me the man most fitted to

be at the head of such a new government."

Phranza's smile was finely satirical. "Ah?" he queried. "Mr. Steele, I am all Russian; let me tell you that the country is incapable from its own weakness of being a republic. All that you anarchistic reformers ever could attain would be to overturn this monarchy and found another. You may seat a Constantine in my chair, but you will not tear down the chair itself."

"I have worked for Constantine and republicanism since my twentieth year," declared Steele. It was not an answer, but he found no ready answer to this cool judgment.

"I am well aware of it. That being the case, no doubt you will prefer sharing Constantine's cell to enduring solitary confinement. Shall I ring?"

"When you please. I—" the American desperately sought the right phrases. "Your excellency, whatever may come to me—and we both know what must come—would be easily met if I understood why you offered me the key instead of the ladder."

Amused comprehension rippled the governor's tranquillity.

"If you wanted a ladder for fifteen minutes, you wanted to use it at this building, since the time was too short for you to go farther away. Since you were to return, your plan was to aid some one else; since you were giving your life to protect that some one, it was probably a woman. I supposed that a lady would find a door more convenient for exit or entrance than a ladder, so I offered the key. I told you that I knew nothing of your affair; I merely imagined. Be quite at ease, I shall inquire no farther."

Lucian Steele was not the first man to be dazed by the governor's glancing rapidity of thought. But his tired mind grasped the salient fact that Florya's secret would be respected, and his great relief was wordless.

When a solitary officer appeared in answer to the bell's summons, Phranza broke the pause:

"We will have no useless parade of guards; I am well assured that you will

go with my officer. Good night, Mr. Steele."

"I have learned much of your excellency to-night," Steele slowly replied. "Good night, sir."

"So?" questioned the governor, keenly. "Come, then, we bear no malice for warfare and what defeat brings, we who have played fairly— Oh, yes, I know there have been no assassinations and bombshells in your plans, however much there were in your comrade's—shake hands."

He leaned forward, brilliant eyes and lips smiling, his hand offered. And mechanically Steele put his hand in the delicate, slender fingers of the man whose death he had designed and under whose sentence of death he now stood.

The impression of the governor's richly tinted face followed him down the corridors through which his guide led the way; down, always down, to a barred door.

To spend forty-eight hours in a barely furnished underground cell, illuminated by a single inadequate lamp, is trying to good companionship; when the knowledge of impending death is present with the companions, the situation wears raw. In the two days Michael Constantine and Lucian Steele here passed together, leader and follower saw each stripped of conventional habits and politic illusions; and to one of them the spectacle had been revealing.

"Steele, you were a fool," Constantine snarled, out of a long silence closing the second day. "You should have used your freedom in freeing me, not have let yourself be shut up here."

Steele grimly eyed the bulky man on the cotbed, he himself standing by the opposite wall.

"I gave you what help I could," he curtly asserted.

Constantine shrugged his shoulders, his harsh face set.

"You were a fool," he reiterated. "You say that you saw Phranza alone—why did you not stab him or shoot him, or twist his neck? You are the stronger. Is this a time for daintiness?"

"He trusted me."

"Child's talk! But I have found another chance for us. When our jailers next bring us food, tell them that you must speak to the governor. No doubt he'll send for you, then you can tell him that you have evidence to give against me, a confession of your own, or anything you choose, so that you get him alone—"

"Well?"

"Then kill him," the other flung, in a vicious whisper. "He dead, the province will rise and set us free; after the province, the whole empire may rise. Is it a good prospect to fight for, Steele? Is it worth a chance?"

The American's eyes flashed across the gloom as sharply as his answer leaped out:

"I knew you and your men were not careful in your methods, Constantine, but—"

"But? Go on, go on!"

"But you might have known better than to make such a proposition to me," he finished, and turned his back to the other.

Silence again. Constantine put his large, round head in his hands and lapsed into sullen revery.

"There was a contrivance one of our students made, once," he mused aloud, after a time. "A thing looking like a book, which held some explosive. Whoever opened the covers died, died suddenly and sharply. If it were here!"

There was a sensuous cruelty in his voice, a gloating caress of the deadly fantasy evoked. Steele said nothing.

"What are you thinking of?" demanded Constantine, abruptly savage. "Can't you make some sound in this place, at least? If you will not work, talk. Of what are you thinking?"

"I am thinking of the years of wretchedness I have spent in trying to establish the republic that you represent," his associate made slow reply. "I am remembering the blank life of the lady who might have been my wife, the youth and fortune I myself have lost—and the courteous justice shown me by the man whose prisoners we are. And if the colossal mistake I commence to realize is

a fact, it is a great pity that I did not meet a conclusive bullet five years ago."

"Amen to that, with all my heart," sneered Constantine, and flung himself back on the cot.

The lamp fastened against the wall sputtered and flickered, dark shadows crept in and around the mute men. Half an hour dragged past.

The sound of turning locks grated out with a harshness that startled both men to quivering expectancy. Overtense nerves shrank from the new event. But the solitary visitor who appeared upon the threshold was not an appalling sight in himself.

"Good evening, gentlemen," greeted the governor, his grace of manner most charming. "Are you at leisure to receive me for an hour?"

Constantine sat in speechless rage and astonishment. It was Steele who moved forward a chair returning the salute.

"Every thanks," Phranza smiled, accepting the seat; his rich uniform and vivid beauty strange enough in that somber place. "Are you unwell, Constantine?"

"I am sick," was the deliberate response, "with hate of you."

"Our regard is mutual, dear sir. Does Mr. Steele share it, I wonder?"

There was something oddly wistful and desolate in the gaze that the tall American turned upon his questioner.

"You have been a fair and generous victor," he answered. "I have no cause for so much hate."

"Have you sold me to him, Steele?" cried Constantine, acutely suspicious. "Is that it? Has he bought you?"

The outraged blood rose over Steele's face. Yet, by a freak of pride, the insult to him stung less than shame that the man whom he had elected to follow should show this low-mindedness before Phranza.

"His excellency did me the honor not to try," he coldly stated. "Nor would he have succeeded."

"You do my discernment but justice," confirmed the governor. "I have not tried, nor do I intend to try. This subject is not amusing, Constantine; I came here to propose a game of dice."

"A—"

"Game of dice, precisely. Dull, you object? Yes, but the stakes are interesting. To tell the truth, I am bored, above there, as you perhaps are bored down here. Let us each risk something. Will you play with me?"

Few men at heart lack the gambling spirit; moreover, these two who received the invitation had already lost everything.

"Yes," assented Constantine, after staring a moment at his serene enemy.

Steele bent his head as the black eyes interrogated him. The governor moved to the door and gave a brief order to some one outside then resumed his seat.

The preparations made were rather elaborate. A small table was brought in and upon it was placed a carved ivory cup containing the tiny ivory cubes. Two trays, each bearing three enameled crystal goblets, were set upon another table near the entrance. The door reclosed and the three men were again left alone.

"We cast three times," explained Phranza, arranging a ring on his last finger. "If you throw highest, respected Constantine, I will have you secretly deported to America and there set free, out of my way—and my reach. Only I would warn you not to enter this country again. If Mr. Steele gains the highest, he will be taken to the border and set at liberty, with the same advice. In either case, we will drink one another's health in the good French wine there on the left-hand tray. But, if I should be the winner, you, Michael Constantine, will take a goblet from the right-hand tray, and drink. It holds a narcotic poison which will spare you the discomfort of a very disagreeable trial and execution which might inflame the public mind and cause me some inconvenience. To be candid, it would suit me extremely well to have you fall sick and die here in your cell. In that case, also, Mr. Steele will continue to be my prisoner as now. Shall we play?"

Dazed, the two captives looked at each other, then at the six scintillant, violet-hued goblets in which the light caught

lovely amethyst reflections shot with gold.

"Whom does your excellency wish to make the first throw?" Steele inquired, when he had quite regained composure.

"Whoever chooses," Phranza waived his right. "Will you satisfy yourselves that the dice are honest?"

"I am satisfied," Steele declined.

But Constantine snatched the ivory cup with trembling haste and turned out the little blocks, weighing and scrutinizing them avidly.

"They seem fair," he grudgingly conceded, finally.

"Cast, then," invited the governor, stifling a yawn.

Before the imminent test Constantine recoiled, and passed the cup to Steele, who threw almost without looking—three. Phranza followed, with four. Constantine made five. On the second round, Steele had two, the governor three, Constantine also two. Before the third and decisive trial of chance, Constantine abruptly stood up.

"The light!" he complained peevishly. "I cannot see—the light is failing."

The governor turned toward the offending lamp. Steele rose to put it in better order, the operation consuming a perceptible space. When the three men again sat down, Constantine had regripped his nerves and quietly watched Steele's throw of four. Phranza made two. Leaning forward, Constantine lingered with the ivory cup in his fingers, shaking and revolving it for many seconds, to turn but two, at last. Amazed, the players regarded one another; the score of each amounted to nine.

The governor first recovered.

"A tie!" he lightly exclaimed. "Why, Fate snaps her fingers at us! Mr. Steele, let me tax your courtesy so far as to ask you to pass here the left-hand tray of Sauterne; we will drink a good night and leave all matters unchanged."

Blankly the American complied, setting the indicated tray of glasses upon the table. His thoughts were less of the liberty just missed, than of the dreary hours of imprisonment recommencing with Phranza's departure.

"Pray, drink," the governor invited his *vis-à-vis*.

Constantine hesitatingly chose a goblet and pushed another across the table; the strain had left him sallow and shaken. Neither appeared to remember Steele, who had remained standing, and he felt no desire to be recalled. The two drank, alone.

"So much for chance," drawled the governor. "I never cared for gambling. Why—what now?"

Constantine had risen, his heavy face inflamed, an unsteady finger pointed toward the other's glass.

"Go order your coffin, Prince Phranza," he panted. "I changed the goblets."

Steele cried out sharply. The governor sat quite still, only a diamond flash crossed the black field of his eyes.

"You changed the goblets?" he echoed.

"While you looked at the lamp. You, the schemer, are outwitted. You the master player, are outplayed. You will die and the province will rise to set me free."

"But you drank!" cried Steele.

Constantine laughed, exultant.

"My goblet was from the safe tray."

"The plan was worthy of you," conceded the governor, his calm a little too perfect. "Only, in your haste you have made an error. The goblets from which you and I have drunk are the same; the glass of sauterne is still on the tray. Look at the colors."

"In fact, the two empty goblets were identical; the full glass was a shade deeper in tint, its violet nearer purple."

"What, what—" Constantine stammered, paling.

"In your guilty haste, Constantine, you blundered. You have poisoned yourself as well as me."

With a choking groan Constantine collapsed on the bed, realization flooding his unwilling brain.

"Is there nothing can be done?" demanded Steele, rough in his horror.

Phranza turned satirical eyes upon him.

"Why, yes, Mr. Steele, there is something can be done—for one of us. You can go up the corridor out there to my private study, taking the turns to the

right. In the drawer of a small desk you will find a phial containing an antidote for this drug. There is enough for one man, no more; to which of us you give it is your own affair. I have sent my people out of call, not wishing to spread this adventure over all the city, and if I attempt to go myself I probably will lose consciousness before reaching aid. Save whoever you choose, or seize the chance to make your own escape, Constantine and I are alike helpless. In case you are interfered with, the countersign for to-night is *Kronstadi*."

"Steele!" Constantine gasped, sitting up. "Steele!"

From one to the other Steele looked, then turned and went out. In the corridor he began to run.

The palace was very quiet. Unmolested, he reached the governor's study, found the tiny bottle indicated, and started his return.

Started, only. As he rounded the first angle in the hall, he found himself face to face with a slender girl clad in black who was approaching.

"Florya!" he exclaimed, halting, long past surprise.

Stupefied, she gazed at him, her dark eyes wide, her delicate lips apart.

"Lucian, you, here? You— Oh," excitement flared up through her, "you escape?"

There was no one else in sight. With an impulse not to be denied, he caught her in his arms, his eyes searching hers.

"Escape? No. Tell me, are you safe, Florya? Has the governor spoken to you of that night or tried to learn who was with me outside the palace?"

"The governor? How should he suspect? No one knows. Lucian, what has happened, where are you going?"

"There is no time to tell," he said. "There is no time." And kissing her with a fierce brevity of passion, he set her aside and hurried on.

The two men left in the cell apparently had not moved or spoken. At Steele's entrance, Constantine started up from the bed.

"In time!" he triumphed savagely. "Give it me. I shall live as he dies, and win at last. Give me the bottle."

The governor remained silent. There was something disquieting in his immobile handsomeness and steadfast, unflinching regard. He even smiled slightly as Steele looked at him.

"Has your Excellency nothing to urge?" asked the American, his voice strange.

"As I hinted earlier in the evening, Mr. Steele, life has taught me that some things cannot be bought," Phranza gave polished reply. "Nor do I believe you could be threatened out of your course. I must leave all to your fine judgment."

"You are safe in doing so," Steele slowly answered, and crossing the room, gave him the little phial. "Take this; it is your own, not mine."

Constantine made a curious noise in his throat, clutching at the blankets. But the governor rose, animation blazing out flamelike from his calm, his hands gripping Steele's shoulders.

"My own? I want what is *not* my own," he flared. "What stake do you suppose I have played for to-night, Steele, if not for you? You," his slim, strong fingers tightened as the amazed American would have moved. "What are you, clean gentleman, doing in these gutter plots? Have I not shown you enough of your Constantine, yet? Do you still cling to his brute selfishness, his low treachery, and lack of honor? Shake free your sense, man; which is the best for the people, this man and his rule or I and mine?"

"I—"

Phranza let his hands fall, his quietness of manner abruptly resumed.

"There was no poison in any of the goblets," he stated, almost with indifference. "This is the twentieth century. Empty glasses are always a different color from full ones. I merely set the stage and let the comedy play itself. Mr. Steele, you will come with me; both your Russian and American property need your attention. I trust you have outgrown your boyish republicanism and the rest of your life will be passed like other people's. Constantine, you are too insignificant for trial and punishment; you will be deported to England and warned to stay there. That is all."

With a long breath, Steele slowly turned and held open the door for the governor to pass out. The surrender was complete.

"It is time for supper," observed Phranza. "Come, change into civilized clothes, Mr. Steele; no doubt my pretty cousin Florya will welcome you. Why, yes, I knew she must be the lady you followed within my walls. I know most things in my own palace. And I would rather promote a wedding than an execution. Come."

Huddled upon the cot, Constantine stared, dumb, as the governor went out in his carelessly worn mastery, while Lucian Steele followed and closed the door behind.

THE PLANKS IN THE WOODSHED

By John Wallace

THE dispute started as usual over something trivial: Janie, trying to unhook a bunch of sage, had stumbled over some boards leaning obliquely against the ridge pole of the lumber room. Cleaning the supper dishes, she began:

"Was it to kill me you left those planks where, of course, anyone couldn't help falling over them?"

Nosing a quarrel the man replied quietly: "I had just brought them in. I cut them to-day from the fallen beech-tree that is rotting down in the meadow."

"What for?"

"One can always find use for planks."

"What for?"

He went on smoking.

"What for?" Is your mouth sewed up?"